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ABSTRACT

The debate over teaching the "canon," a collection of great books authored by Homer, Plato, Shakespeare, Kant, Darwin, and others that has traditionally represented the Western intellectual tradition, as a core of the college curriculum, is examined. Discussion begins with a description of how the canon has been taught from ancient Greece to the present, noting key arguments for this form of pedagogy that persist today, specific books taught at different times over the centuries, and past controversies over the canon. It then proceeds to an examination of anticanonism and the epistemological and political dimensions of the theory underlying it. Concrete examples of anticanonism currently in operation at colleges and universities are presented. It is argued that while much of what anticanonists say is hyperbolic or mistaken, their demand for fair treatment of works by marginalized authors and great non-Western works should be given consideration. This would mean re-examining works worthy of canonization that may have been obscured by prejudice, but requiring that these works be selected based on merit. Appended are a list of "great ideas," and reading lists from three schools with either canonical or anticanonical curriculums. (Contains 84 reference notes and a bibliography of approximately 125 items.) (MSE)

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